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ABSTRACT

Change is easier to demand than to endure. The deeper we go into reform, the rougher it gets and the higher the degree of public impatience and frustration. The higher the frustration, the greater the temptation for policy makers to try the quick fix. Inadequate funding is another reality faced by "ideal" reform plans. At least 30 states have deficits, and many that raised education expenditures last year will cut them this year. We are nearing the "implementation dip," when the early costs exceed the early rewards. Challenges include lack of a clear vision about school restructuring, confusion among higher education institutions concerning instructional improvement and their K-12 reform roles, too much focus at the basic skills level, piecemeal reform efforts, uncertain state commitment to reform, confusion among parents and educators over reform proposals, weak change incentives, inadequate assessment and accountability systems, leadership deficiencies, and ineffective teacher-student relations. During 1991, the Education Commission of the States will pursue three major strategies: (1) transforming teaching and learning to fulfill individual potential; (2) promoting system change to foster coherence and self-renewal; and (3) embracing diversity to ensure equal opportunity for individuals, cultural enrichment for all, and the fullest possible use of the nation's resources. (MLH)

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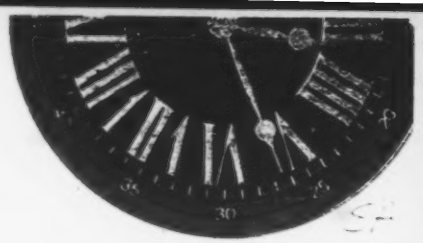

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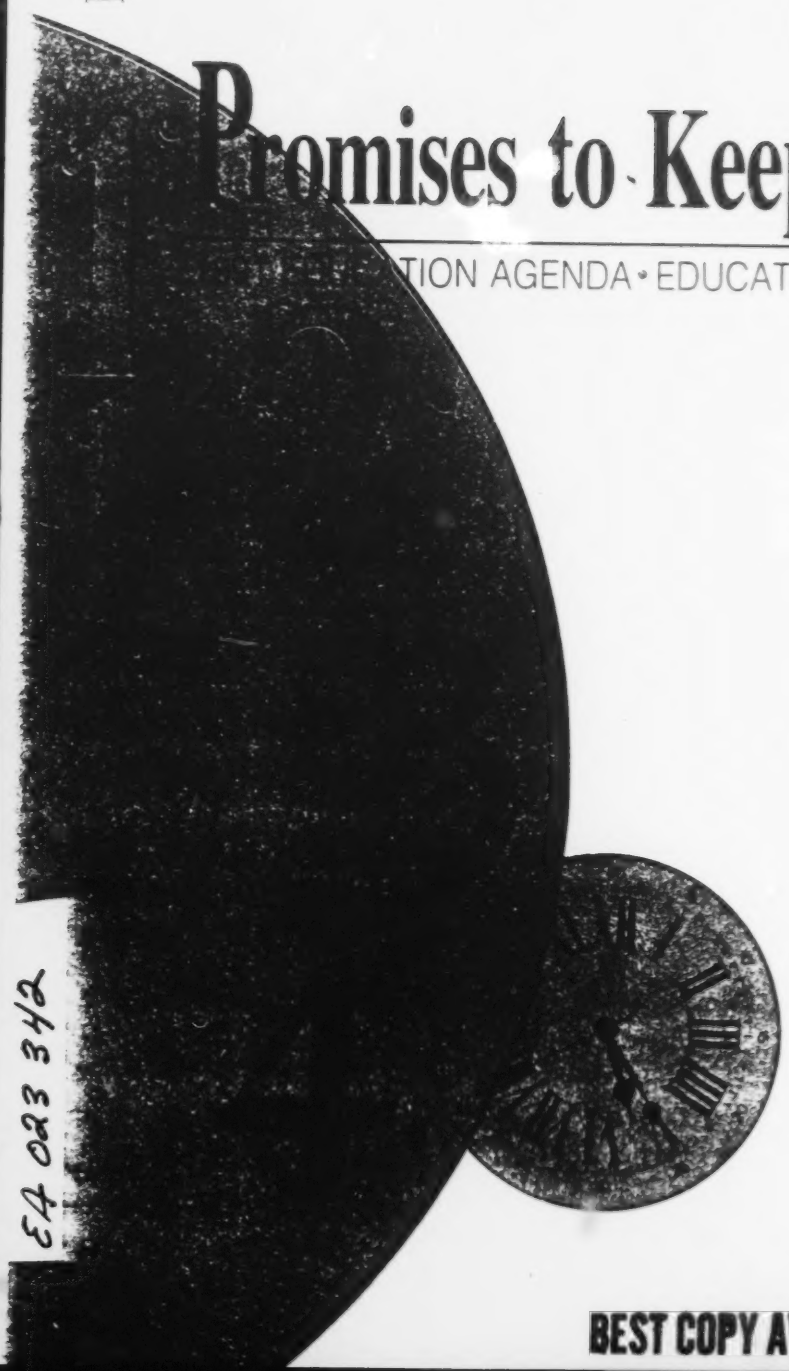

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Promises to Keep

1991 EDUCATION AGENDA • EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

Policy and Priorities Committee
Wallace Wilkinson, Chairman

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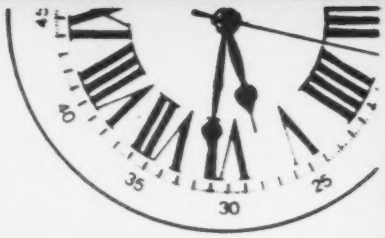


Preface

During the past year, a major theme for the Education Commission of the States has been the message that *All Kids Can Learn*. To make good on that promise, we must challenge many long-held assumptions about education. We must clearly affirm what we want our graduates to know and be able to do upon completion of high school and higher education as well. Then, we must design an education process in which all children learn. To do that, we need to identify the crucial elements that must change and then build a comprehensive, coherent strategy for bringing about the necessary changes. Under the leadership of Governor John McKernan of Maine, ECS will focus on that task over the next year.

As the ECS Policy and Priorities Committee prepared this *Education Agenda 1991*, the accelerating momentum of education reform — and the sometimes bewildering variety of related initiatives and activities — was crashing head-on into the economic and political constraints that define reality for policy makers. Contributors to the momentum for change include:

- The work of the National Education Goals Panel
- Proposals for a national examination system
- The America 2000 initiative set forth by President Bush and Education Secretary Lamar Alexander
- Newly launched foundation-sponsored programs
- Expanded work by national reform leaders and organizations Dozens of efforts undertaken by states, colleges and universities, districts and local schools

All these efforts must now be seen in the context of revenue shortfalls, budget reductions, labor negotiations, court cases and, yes, partisan politics.

The message here? We must persist, and we must prevail, in efforts to fundamentally transform our education systems — not because it will be easy, and not because we will be revered for our efforts. But because our failure to do so would consign future generations of Americans to a quality of life, work and citizenship that is less than they deserve, less than the best we can do. We have begun the effort, and now we have promises to keep.

Wallace Wilkinson
Governor of Kentucky
Chairman, ECS Policy and Priorities Committee

Part I: Context for the Education Agenda

"Change is easier to demand than to endure."

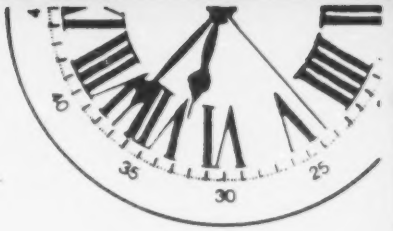
Last year, the ECS Policies and Priorities Committee said, in the *Education Agenda 1990*, that each of us across the nation is "caught up in the wave of change, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not." This year, the wave gathered momentum. More and more of us are touched by global events.

Increasingly we see that what happens in one part of the world affects what happens elsewhere. What happens in Kuwait is connected to what happens in Des Moines. What happens in the Brazilian rain forest affects the cost of home building in Phoenix. Policy makers find that the homelessness issue is connected to policies dealing with mental health, state banking and investment, drug and alcohol abuse, public transportation, welfare and community health, state incentives for new home construction, minimum wage laws, urban redevelopment initiatives and anti-crime programs — not to mention education policies and programs.

How do we solve problems that are so intertwined, so *systemic*? Where do we begin? How can we learn to change systems after training ourselves so well to identify individual "problems," deal with them in isolation and dispense programmatic solutions?

We have moved past the easy pronouncements about why our systems must reform into the more confusing questions reform raises and the pain it brings. The euphoria in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe is over; tension is high, progress is uncertain. Change in the Middle East, in Yugoslavia, in South Africa or in Brazil divides old allies and even spills blood. Ahead two paces, back one; ahead two more and back three. Once systems start to fly apart, it is hard to hold on to the parts that still work. Rational planning cannot predict all the contingencies or keep irrational forces totally in check.

The difficulties of change are as obvious in a school or a school district as they are on a global scale. Five teachers work day and night for a year to create a challenging curriculum for high-risk students, but their colleagues are uncooperative, their principal gives only half-hearted support, central administration refuses to change the class schedule, and the school board



caves in to the first organized group of parents to complain.

A union and a school board try to put collaborative decision making into their collective bargaining negotiations, but talks collapse when neither side's leaders can break out of old roles. Each side claims it wants reform; each side loves the children; each wants the other to change first or most.

A university president, at some risk, announces an initiative to bring greater emphasis to undergraduate teaching and learning. On all sides are barriers: faculty promotion, tenure and professional prestige are strongly tied to research and publication; state funding formulas reveal conflicting priorities; legislators' concerns seem to focus on buildings, athletics and enrollment growth far more than on how well or how much students are learning.

State officials break up or take over dysfunctional school districts, and the lawsuits and countersuits fly. Reform bogs down in court.

"If it is starting to hurt, it may be starting to work"

The deeper we go into reform, the rougher it gets and the higher the levels of public impatience and frustration. The higher the frustration, the greater policy makers' temptation to try anything that looks like it might take the heat off, any quick fix.

And then, to really complicate matters, states begin to run out of money. "It's like we're halfway across a chasm," a policy analyst says, "and we're running out of momentum." At least 30 states are looking at deficits this year. A number of states that raised education expenditures by 5-10% last year may cut them by the same percentage this year.

These are the realities our "ideal" reform plans encounter as they begin to affect the system. Confusing interconnections and side effects, adversarial politics, turf battles, resistance from entrenched interests, legal wrangling, mounting impatience, resource constraints — all of them predictable, but no less painful for that.

We are at the beginning of what is known as "the implementation dip" — that point in the change process when things seem to get worse before they can get better, when the early costs exceed the early rewards. This is when those who can't stand the heat leave the kitchen. It would be a mistake to leave now. We can adjust and fine-tune and learn and improve our approaches as we go ahead, but we cannot back out.

We have a clearer grasp than ever of the challenges of system change and a better sense than ever of what state leaders need to do. Our experience as policy makers and our studies of system change tell us that in most states we face these challenges:

- There exists no clear, compelling, widely accepted vision of what a restructured classroom, school, district or state K-12 system would look like or do differently.

- Far too few universities and colleges are convinced of the need to place a higher priority on improvement of teaching and learning; and there is confusion among higher education institutions about their role in K-12 reform.

- We have not yet asked for a much higher level of learning *for the full range of students* — a literacy that includes critical and creative thinking, problem solving, core knowledge in the subject areas and learning how to learn. We are still talking as if a basic skills education is sufficient for success. It is not, and we must be clear that it is not.

- Reform to date has been piecemeal and fragmented. Good programs and initiatives need to be linked and amplified.

- Questioning whether state leaders have a deep, long-term commitment to reform, many educators are prepared to "wait this one out."

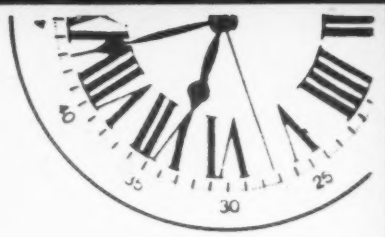
- Many educators are feeling overwhelmed and confused by the variety of reform proposals and policies. States need more coherent reform strategies and action plans.

- Parents and the public are not yet convinced that the K-12 system needs the "radical reform" called for by President Bush and the governors. Many parents think the system is flawed but their children's schools are just fine. Parents for whom the current system has worked well are reluctant to change it for "other people's children." Although they are increasingly dismayed at the costs of college and the lack of attention given to university undergraduates, few parents believe that higher education institutions must change to meet new challenges and serve new students.

- In many places, the incentives to retain the status quo are stronger than the incentives to change. Policy has yet to create a sufficiently coherent, supportive environment for innovation, either in the K-12 system or in higher education.

- Assessment and accountability systems are inadequate. While most students are extensively tested, we have few indicators of students' capacity to write, think or solve problems, few indicators of schoolwide or campuswide progress toward reform and no robust indicators of statewide system progress.

- Not enough people know how to exercise the kinds of leadership reform requires. Too few teachers know how to do what is required or feel free to do it. Professional development and new policy incentives are absolute musts.



- Reforms have affected institutional aspects of the system but have not yet penetrated into the heart of the matter: how students and teachers talk and work with each other daily. Until there is less teacher talk and more active learning — discussion, inquiry, problem solving, writing, purposeful reading, engagement and challenge of minds — reform will not produce significant results.

With this understanding of the progress of reform and the difficulties of change, fleshed out in research by ECS and other groups, we must all focus our energies strategically as we forge ahead. If we are getting uncomfortable, we must be moving in the right direction. We are buoyed by examples of success in some districts and on some campuses, in other public institutions and private-sector corporations. We know it can be done on a small scale and we know it **must** be done for the entire system, for all our children. We have made promises too important to recant. We must keep them.

Part II: Promises to Keep

If we are to keep the promises of reform, we must increase our efforts to change what happens in our schools. Over the next year, ECS will continue its work on the major strategies that we believe will result in an education system that serves all students well. Those strategies are:

- Transforming teaching and learning
- Promoting system change
- Embracing diversity

TRANSFORMING TEACHING AND LEARNING

Change is only undirected motion unless it is focused on achievement of a goal, a vision. And so we are reminded that efforts to change the education system must be grounded in clear answers to the questions, "Change *for what*? To achieve what goals?"

At whatever level of the system change is being contemplated, there are other questions that demand our attention. What are the *fundamental* purposes of schooling? What are our revised expectations for learners, teachers and other education leaders? How is education in and for American democracy different from education elsewhere? Who is responsible for whose learning? Who is accountable for what? Who makes which decisions?

ECS Priorities for Action

- Help to create a clearer, richer, more focused vision of the desired outcomes of education; similarly, delineate the characteristics of restructured classrooms, schools, districts and colleges.
- Support initiatives to reshape curricula, emphasizing higher expectations and higher literacies for all students and integrating community service in learning experiences; forge connections between initiatives for curriculum reform and those aimed at school restructuring.
- Define the conditions that promote innovation and excellence in teaching and learning; delineate policy options that nurture those conditions and promote constructive change.
- Promote development of policy to support alternative new forms of student and institutional assessment.
- Support initiatives to redesign both teacher education and professional development; delineate policies that strengthen preparation of a teaching force for restructured schools.

- Facilitate efforts to strengthen connections between the K-12 system, community colleges, baccalaureate colleges and universities.

PROMOTING SYSTEM CHANGE

The education system is no longer serving our needs adequately. It is not preparing our students and society for the demands of the future. And it cannot be fixed by adjusting old policy and practice here and there. The need is for *fundamental redesign* of the system. But our best estimate is that less than 5% of American schools and school districts are engaged in serious restructuring work. In higher education, the pace of change is slower, the evidence of change less widespread. We celebrate and showcase many exemplary school and campus programs, but those efforts are still isolated, still fragmented, even still heroic. However good they are, without a system that supports and encourages them, they do not reproduce themselves.

To build on the successes of heroes and volunteers, to exponentially expand, deepen and accelerate the restructuring effort — especially in a time of economic constraint — will require sustained commitment. It also will require keen understanding of both the substance and the process — the policy and the politics — of systemic change.

The urgent task now before ECS is to disseminate a clear statement of the purposes and elements of effective efforts to restructure education systems. The answer is not a collection of prescriptive, top-down policy mandates — tidy but ineffective — such as those that have failed in the past. Rather, the challenge is to assist policy makers in designing a coherent public policy *context* in which change in schools and colleges — change that produces higher levels of achievement by all learners — is encouraged, nurtured and rewarded.

ECS Priorities for Action

- Create a clearer, more focused understanding of the important strategies and steps requisite to fundamental, systemic change in education.

- In selected states, assist leaders in assessing current status, designing coherent strategies and policies for restructuring their education systems and sustaining change over the long term.

- Build capacity for comprehensive system restructuring by convening state leadership groups, offering seminars and workshops and providing resource materials.

- Continue development of financial models that illustrate how states, districts, schools and postsecondary institutions can reallocate resources to fund system change.

- Promote, both nationally and within states, communication strategies that effectively mobilize students, parents, educators and the general public in support of fundamental system change.

- Implement a process for periodically assessing the progress of *system* change; assist states in analyzing and monitoring their own efforts in both K-12 and higher education reform.

- Develop effective networks to support these efforts, involving national reform leaders, business organizations, the philanthropic community, ECS advisory commissioners and others.

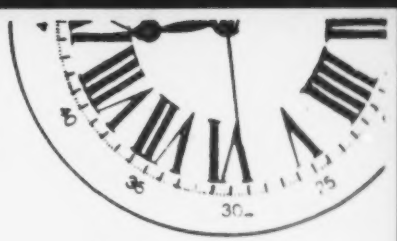
EMBRACING DIVERSITY

Around the world, from the Baltics to the West Bank to South Africa, people look to American democracy for leadership and insight about issues of human diversity. How well suited are we to lead? After all of the demographic reports, the studies, the recommendations of blue-ribbon panels, we still struggle to make good on our promises — promises of equality, opportunity, dignity and full participation, of course, but also the promises of a richer culture, of expanded ways of knowing, of eyes and hearts that see and feel more fully.

When we talk of diversity we naturally refer to the needed minds and voices of women and people of color. But we also seek the contributions of the physically disabled, the contrasts borne of geographical location and the stimulation of intellectual and ideological divergence.

ECS Priorities for Action

- Contribute to development of a critical mass of women and people of color in leadership roles across the education system — pre-kindergarten to graduate and professional education, schoolhouse to statehouse.



- Build the capacity of state and institutional leaders to improve minority student participation and achievement.

- Identify and promote changes in policy and practice that will lead to *all students* learning at much higher levels. Emphasize policy and action to reduce fragmentation in policy making to better serve children, youth and families; to promote equity in education finance; to address issues unique to urban education; to eliminate causes of preventable learning impairments; and to help students raise their personal education goals and expectations.

- Support mentoring programs that foster constructive relationships with students; promote service as integral to education for the democracy.

- Model organizationally the value of diversity and infuse its value in all aspects of ECS operations.

- Promote efforts to ensure the participation and empowerment of *students* in efforts to restructure education.

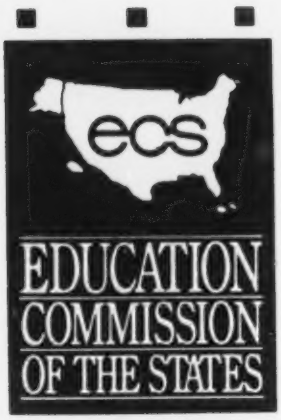
Conclusion

Change — the kind of change we need in American education — is difficult, halting, complex, frustrating, even risky business. But we've made the initial commitment, taken the first steps, leap out over the chasm. And this is no time to stop. We have promises to keep.

In *transforming teaching and learning* lies the promise of individual potential fulfilled; the promise of heritage affirmed, technology advanced, thoughtfulness enhanced; the promise of accountability for high standards and the stewardship of human and fiscal resources; the promise of a competitive work force, a strengthened economy, a revitalized democracy, a more just society.

In *promoting system change* lies the promise of coherence and self-renewal; the promise of addressing problems, not just symptoms; the promise of benefits to all learners, not just a fortunate few.

And in *embracing diversity*, we make good on the promise of equal opportunity for individuals, cultural enrichment for all and the fullest possible use of our nation's human resources.



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